NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 1-9904
RON GRUNBERG/LONDON

JANUARY 6, 1976

DESPAIRING NORTHERN IRELAND

ANNCR:

AT VARIOUS TIMES IN THE LONG SECTARIAN STRUGGLE IN NORTHERN IRELAND THERE HAS BEEN OPTIMISM ABOUT A SETTLEMENT. NOT SO TODAY. VOA CORRESPONDENT RON GRUNBERG SENDS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT IN WHICH HE SAYS THE 17 DEATHS ALREADY THIS YEAR HAVE BROUGHT ONLY DESPAIR IN NORTHERN IRLAND.

VOICE:

IF YOU LOOK AT THE STATISTICS OF DEATH SINCE THE VIOLENCE BEGAN IN 1969 YOU WOULD HAVE TO WONDER HOW THERE COULD HAVE BEEN ANY OPTIMISM THAT A SOLUTION TO THE TROUBLES WOULD BE FOUND. THE NUMBER OF DEATHS GREW EACH YEAR TO A HIGH OF FOUR HUNDRED SIXTY-SEVEN IN 1972 AND HAS BEEN MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED EACH YEAR SINCE. BUT A FEW TIMES DURING THE PAST SEVEN YEARS THERE HAS BEEN HOPE -- MOST NOTABLY WHEN A NORTHERN IRELAND EXECUTIVE WAS FORMED, IN WHICH THE MINORITY CATHOLIC POPULATION SHARED POWER. BUT THAT COLLAPSED WHEN THE PROTESTANTS STAGED A GENERAL STRIKE IN MAY, 1974.

GOVERNMENT POWER WAS RETURNED TO LONDON AND THE NEXT PLAN WAS TO HOLD A CONVENTION OF DELEGATES REPRESENTING MOST IF NOT ALL THE FACTIONS TO AGREE TO A NEW FORM OF GOVERNMENT. THAT CONVENTION WAS HELD RECENTLY. BUT THE PROTESTANTS AGAIN DOMINATED AND THERE WAS NO PROVISION FOR POWER-SHARING. THE ELEVEN MONTH OLD CEASEFIRE, RESPECTED UP TO NOW ONLY ON PAPER, SEEMS ABOUT TO BE RENOUNCED IN NAME AS WELL. ALMOST FORGOTTEN IS THE FACT THAT THE BRITISH MINISTER FOR ULSTER, MERLYN REES, HAS PHASED OUT THE POLICY OF INTERNMENT WITHOUT TRIAL FOR

SUSPECTED TERRORISTS, ALWAYS ONE OF THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES. NOW THERE IS A DESPAIRING MOMENTUM BUILDING FOR VIOLENCE; ROUND AFTER ROUND OF PROTESTANT AND CATHOLIC KILLINGS.

NEXT MONDAY, WHEN PARLIAMENT HERE IN LONDON RECONVENES, MISTER REES WILL HAVE TO GIVE THE GOVERNMENT'S REACTION TO THE ULSTER CONVENTION'S REPORT. BECAUSE OF THE PRESENT CLIMATE, MISTER REES IS LIKELY NEITHER TO REJECT NOR ACCEPT THE REPORT, BUT TO SEND IT BACK TO THE DELEGATES FOR RECONSIDERATION. ONE COMMENTATOR HERE WROTE THAT MISTER REES KNOWS THERE IS NO CHANCE FOR A SETTLEMENT ANYTIME SOON BUT THAT HE'S GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS SO AS NOT TO REMOVE HOPE.

AFTER SEVEN YEARS OF INTERMITTENT VIOLENCE, THERE'S LITTLE PROSPECT OF NEW IDEAS THAT CAN BRING PEACE -- NEARLY ALL POSSIBLE NOTIONS FOR COMPROMISE HAVE BEEN PUT FORWARD AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER. THE MOMENTUM FOR SETTLEMENT SEEMS TO BE LOST. THE ONLY HOPE RAISED BY COMMENTATORS IN BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND IS THAT TWO DAYS OF BRUTAL SECTARIAN MURDERS MAY HAVE ENOUGH SHOCK VALUE FOR YET ANOTHER REASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION THROUGHOUT THE RANKS OF BOTH THE CATHOLIC AND PROTESTANT COMMUNITIES.

GH/CAK